



# The Human Services Workforce Initiative

MULTIPLE WORKFORCES

## *A Campaign for the Frontline*



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## **Human Services Workers: Portrait of a Vulnerable Workforce**

Nationally, there are at least 2.5 million employees in the human services workforce, two-thirds of whom serve low-income children, youth, and families. In the paper that launched the Human Services Workforce Initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation noted several characteristics of these workers.\*

### **Concerns of the Human Services Workforce**

**Many human services workers have serious concerns about their jobs and the organizations where they work.**

- Two-thirds say that their pay is low (67 percent) and that they work long hours (62 percent); fully 70 percent say that they have too much work to do.
- Eighty-one percent agree that it is easy to burn out.
- Forty-five percent say that their organizations rarely or only sometimes receive enough support from the community, and 51 percent believe that they are “unappreciated.”

### **Dedication of the Human Services Workforce**

**Yet, despite these concerns, human services workers are dedicated to the work they do and they strongly believe in the results that they get.**

- A near-unanimous 98 percent say that they accomplish a great deal or a fair amount in their jobs.
- Ninety-eight percent also say that helping people was an important consideration in taking their job; 93 percent say serving the community was an important consideration; and 92 percent say the opportunity to do challenging work was an important consideration.
- Yet fewer than 1 in 10 cite salary, benefits, or job security as the main reason they go to work each day: 40 percent say it is because they like the work they do; 20 percent say it is because they help people and work for the common good; and 14 percent say it is a combination of these two things.

### **The Future of the Human Services Workforce**

Despite their dedication to the vulnerable children and families that they serve, human services workers recognize that their jobs aren’t getting better or easier, and efforts to recruit and retain the best and brightest either aren’t in place or aren’t working.

- A third of workers leave in two years.
- More than 40 percent of new hires plan to leave in the fairly near term.
- Fewer than one-third of graduates interested in this work know how to find it.

\*Light, Paul C., *The Health of the Human Services Workforce*, Washington, DC: The Center for Public Service, The Brookings Institution, March 2003.

## **What is the Human Services Workforce Initiative?**

The Human Services Workforce Initiative is, at its heart, a campaign to promote greater recognition of the importance of frontline human services workers, the threats to their current and future viability, and the actions needed to make improvements in this critical area.

The key elements of this campaign are

- Identifying, understanding, and increasing awareness of the state of the human services workforce and the short- and long-term challenges frontline workers face
- Identifying and promoting best practices and solutions to address these challenges
- Engaging stakeholders and partners in advocating for implementation of these solutions
- Engaging, educating, and influencing policymakers to address the needs of the human services workforce through policy and practice

Intrinsic to the success of this effort is an understanding of why human services matter. The Human Services Workforce Initiative (HSWI) is focused on the frontline workers serving vulnerable children and families. Frontline workers—those who provide direct services—are the heart and soul of our nation’s human services system. Often the only connection between vulnerable families and the organized systems of services designed to help them, a stable, motivated, prepared, and supported frontline workforce is perhaps the most direct way to help disadvantaged children and families beat the odds.

HSWI’s premise is that human services, delivered well and provided at critical points in the lives of disadvantaged children, can have a positive impact. These services greatly influence short- and long-term outcomes for kids.

## **Why Focus on the Workforce?**

We focus on the human services workforce because the quality of human services matters. We believe there is a powerful relationship between the quality of human service staff (experience, training, stability, expectations, morale, etc.) and the effectiveness of the services they deliver. If workers are well-trained and supported, have access to needed resources, are held accountable for a reasonable workload, and are valued by their employers, it follows that they will be able to effectively perform their jobs. If, however, they are as vulnerable as the children and families that they serve, they will be ineffective in improving outcomes for children and families. **The best policies and program design cannot overcome the negative influence of a demoralized or poorly prepared frontline staff.**

Untold billions of dollars are spent to provide human services, and the stakes, in terms of resources committed, the lives of children, and the impact on our society, are enormous. Unfortunately, all indications today are that our frontline human services workforce is struggling. In some instances, poor compensation contributes to excessive turnover, while in others, an unreasonable workload and endless paperwork render otherwise capable staff ineffective. Keeping morale up is difficult in all of the human services fields, and it is remarkable, and a credit to human services professionals, that so many of them stick with it, year after year.

**Why focus on the human services workforce? Simply put, we cannot succeed at producing better outcomes for children and families without aggressively addressing the workforce.**

### **Who is in the Human Services Workforce?**

HSWI targets frontline direct service staff—those who have direct contact with vulnerable children and their families—in both the public and private non-profit sectors.

This initiative defines the “human services workforce” as the frontline staff in five key fields:

1. Child welfare
2. Juvenile justice
3. Child care
4. Youth development and
5. Employment services

In each of these fields services are provided and decisions made that have life long impact on the trajectory of children’s lives.

We know that by focusing on this staff we are leaving important participants in the lives of children out of the initiative. Teachers, nurses, public defenders, judges, supervisors, administrators, and others are important and have their issues as well. But, realistically, the initiative is already very broad in its current design and, were we to add further workforces to the mix, it would spread our resources impossibly thin.

We recognize, too, that the staff we have selected for our focus are working in five discrete fields (or sub-fields) and are part of five very different workforces. Each of these “fields” is at a different point in terms of understanding the condition of its workforce, the visibility of the issues which plague it, and consensus on strategies for improvement. Each workforce is governed by separate laws and regulations, funded separately, and administered by different organizations. As a result, while there are common difficulties across the five fields, solutions to the crises in each field will likely be found *within* that field.

### **HSWI’s Strategy & Partners**

How then can the human services recruit, develop, and retain a quality workforce? How can the chasm between what human services workers are asked to do and how they are equipped for the task be reduced or eliminated? And how can systemic reform efforts assure that frontline workers have the knowledge and skills to successfully perform their jobs in ways prescribed by policy solutions or the implementation of best practices?

These questions are central to the mission of HSWI. The initiative operates on three interrelated strategic paths:

- 1. Collecting and Disseminating Data** – Increasing awareness of, and providing better information about, the state of the human services workforce. Our mission is to join with others to raise the visibility of, and sense of urgency about, workforce issues. Through a

series of publications, conferences, and other communications efforts we hope to call greater attention to workforce issues and help describe and define the status of the human services workforce.

- 2. Identifying and Increasing Awareness of Best Practices** – Disseminating information on effective or promising strategies and approaches. Across the country and the human services fields, administrators and others are implementing creative solutions to the workforce crisis and, for their agencies, solving parts of the puzzle.
- 3. Influencing Policy** – Identifying the underlying systemic barriers which hamper the system’s ability to recruit and retain a qualified, motivated workforce and advocating for policy solutions which can make a deep, long-term difference.

The challenges of the human services workforce are vast. The workforce issues do not and cannot stand apart from all the factors that define human services—factors such as funding, professional standards, accreditation, professional jealousies and fragmentation, higher education, issues of race and gender, and the political process that cuts across all these issues. We are under no illusions: we lack the resources and expertise to “fix” the human services system. Even with all the resources, expertise, and political influence we can imagine, all pulling in the same direction, significantly impacting the human services workforce is an exceedingly difficult and long-term endeavor.

Fortunately, we are not alone in this work. HSWI recognizes that there have been, and continue to be, many efforts to identify the problems within these workforces and to propose practice and policy solutions. As the comments below suggest, a focus on the workforce and concern about its future is widespread. A critical element of the initiative is forming partnerships with grantees and others who work within and across the five fields and who are engaged in problem identification, creation of best practices, and solution development.

### **The Crisis in the Human Services Workforce**

The knowledge and skills needed to practice a youth development approach are far-reaching, yet preliminary research conducted in the mid-1990’s showed that most youth workers did not have access to coherent education, training, and professional development opportunities that can effectively prepare them for this work.

*Academy for Educational Development (AED)*

Child care and preschool programs have difficulty attracting and keeping good individuals to work with young children. A third of program staff leave the field each year, primarily due to the lack of adequate compensation—low salaries, few benefits—and difficult working conditions. Research has clearly shown that the skill and commitment of the adults in early childhood programs directly affects the quality of care and education given to children.

*National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)*

## **Strengthening the Workforce: What It Takes**

Strengthening the workforce in a human services field, or in a single agency, is a difficult, complex, and long-term endeavor. While there is strong evidence that a workforce can be turned around and useful tools exist and are being developed to help, unfortunately there are no real short cuts and no easy answers.

### **The key to improving the quality of the workforce is improving the quality of the jobs.**

Surveys and other data make it clear that the people entering the human services fields are people who want to help, who are motivated to make a difference for children, their families, and their communities. As part of HSWI's development we have visited agencies and programs across the country and spoken with frontline staff about their work—it is an inspiring experience!

These workers are dedicated to their organizations and the work that they do, and they measure their job satisfaction by the good they are able to do. On a recent site visit we noticed that try as we might, we could not get a group of frontline workers to focus on themselves and their situation. Over and again the conversation drifted to the kids they were working with, their concerns about program effectiveness, their need to be better equipped to provide more effective services.

But, as strong as their commitment is, many frontline human services workers cannot continue to commit to a job or an agency or a field or a career, unless some fundamental things are in place. The list of fundamentals includes the following:

- Adequate compensation, commensurate with background, skills, experience and the importance of the work
- Reasonable fringe benefits, including health insurance, some form of pension program, and paid leave
- Acceptable working conditions—reasonable, consistent hours; a workload that allows staff to be effective service providers; needed tools—offices, equipment, on the job safety, and needed transportation
- Opportunities for skill development and promotion
- Supportive, attentive, high quality supervision
- A sense that the work is appreciated

To be sure, many human services workers do their work in the absence of some or all of these conditions. They stay out of commitment to the work and to the population they serve, but their effectiveness is inevitably reduced, and their tenure is threatened, when the job they do is not properly supported.

As difficult as they are, these issues can be successfully addressed. Often we are asked what advice we would have for elected officials, administrators, or advocates seeking to address workforce issues. While solutions, priorities, and challenges differ greatly across fields, jurisdictions and individual agencies, there are some things that clearly are common to all and that, in our view, make the “short list” of things that need to be done:

1. **Get data.** You cannot fix what you cannot identify, define, and count. Most human services agencies, even the largest and most sophisticated, know very little about their staff or about the workforce-related trends in their organizations. Developing a broad data system—one that includes information systems and garners input from staff through exit interviews, focus groups, and other means—is a necessary prerequisite to effectively addressing the workforce needs of a human services agency or system. While data needs will vary, some minimum considerations will often include information on and analysis of turnover rates; recruitment patterns; promotion experience; internal transfers; reasons for leaving and staying; credentials of staff in particular jobs; demographics; and for all of this, trends over time.
2. **Set and work toward broadly understood, high visibility, measurable goals.** The presence of reliable data on the workforce will allow for setting goals in areas considered most important, and for developing and carrying out plans to meet those long- and short-term goals. Consistent, genuine inclusion of staff at all levels in the planning and implementation of a workforce initiative is essential.
3. **Make workforce considerations a more prominent aspect of organizational planning, budgeting and programming.** Adding questions such as “What will this mean for the workforce?” or “How will this change affect our workforce needs?” to the routine examination of agency decisions and actions is an important shift in thinking. As important as workforce considerations are, they exist in the background for most organizations, and the workforce impact often comes as an unintended, and surprising, result of agency trends and changes.
4. **Promote collaboration between human resources and human services.** Some of the most successful efforts to address workforce issues feature a partnership or collaboration between human resource and human service professionals. Working together as a team, breaking down organizational barriers in a climate that includes expectations of collaboration, will enable the organization to utilize the multiple skills and knowledge of both groups and move the effort more powerfully.
5. **Consciously create a workplace environment that makes people want to come to work.** This includes providing clerical support, ensuring the availability of needed equipment like computers, providing adequate workspace, and establishing reasonable expectations and workload. Most importantly, this includes hiring and cultivating well-trained supervisors, who teach, support and respect their staff. Staff need to feel they are **appreciated and respected as professionals**; this requires a constant two-way information flow and recognition for achievements that transcends awards or plaques but includes listening to staff and engaging them in decisions. Internal opportunities are important as well: some of the best staff will only stay if there are **opportunities to grow and advance** in their field.

Interestingly, there is a great deal of congruence between the advice we would give human services providers about addressing social issues in the community and the suggestions we make

about addressing internal workforce issues: get good data, analyze the problem, include stakeholders, set goals, measure results.

The skills human services administrators have used for years, turned inward, can effectively address the workforce challenge.

## **HSWI & the Future**

HSWI is the only effort focused on workforce issues across a number of human services fields. Our breadth of interest, our very targeted focus on workforce, and our national scope have positioned us to be opportunistically involved and influential in discussions about the human services workforce in many venues. We are now positioned to help leaders in some of the individual fields come together by supporting the work of multi-organization coalitions, fostering coordination of workforce-related efforts, spurring the development of consensus, and advancing policy agendas.

Addressing the human services workforce challenge effectively will require a long and arduous effort, but the task is too important to be ignored. Leadership of several kinds—intellectual, political, administrative—will be required. Perhaps most importantly, we have to convey a sense of possibility—a conviction that workforce issues can be effectively addressed and that programs and outcomes can be improved as a result.

It is far easier to launch a new program, pass a new law, or conduct a new study than it is to change the composition, capacity, and stability of a multi-million-person workforce. But sometimes taking on the hardest tasks is inescapable: without addressing the workforce, we believe, we cannot fully realize the benefits of our society's investment in human services; without an improved workforce we cannot reasonably expect better outcomes.

Why address the human services workforce? Because as daunting as it is to take on this monster<sup>[LS1]</sup> of an issue, we really have no choice.



### **About Cornerstones for Kids**

The mission of Cornerstones for Kids (C4K) is to improve the lives and circumstances of vulnerable children. C4K is a not-for-profit organization formed in 2004, and led by the Cornerstone Consulting Group, to house and manage the Human Services Workforce Initiative (HSWI). The premise of HSWI is that human services can positively impact the lives of vulnerable children and families, but that we cannot produce better outcomes for these individuals without addressing the workforce charged with helping them. In partnership with key national and state organizations in the fields of child welfare, juvenile justice, child care, youth development, and employment service, C4K is identifying the challenges facing this workforce, highlighting best practices, and working toward policy solutions. HSWI is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

For more information about Cornerstones for Kids and HSWI, please visit: [www.cornerstones4kids.org](http://www.cornerstones4kids.org).